A Love Beyond Time

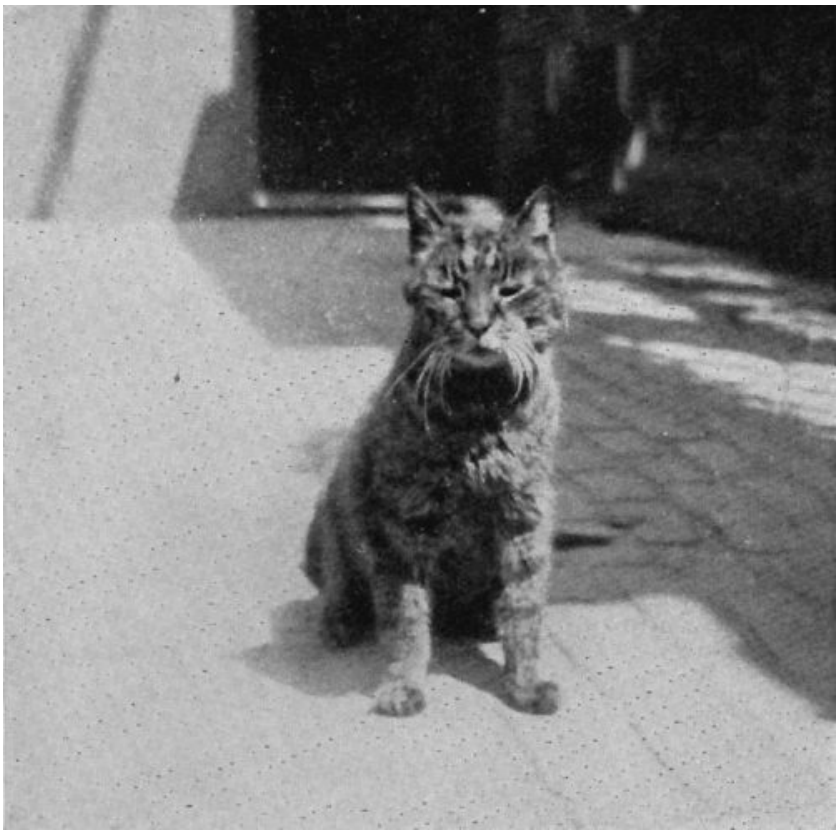
A Pride and Prejudice Time Travel Variation

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Coming Soon from Anna Lockhart
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This book is dedicated to the memory of Mike, The British Museum Cat (1909-1929), a gentleman and a scholar. RIP, old chap.

Prologue

London - 1922

The doors were just about to close for the evening, so the crowds visiting The British Museum in London had begun to thin out as all of the tourists slowly streamed toward the exit. It was Elizabeth Bennet's favorite time of day, when the whole building became silent. At last, she could finish the bulk of her cataloguing work in peace with only the museum cat, Mike, to keep her company. After several weeks with nothing much to do, a new shipment of paintings had just arrived from a collector somewhere in Cheshire. While everything had been uncrated earlier in the day, the curator left it up to Elizabeth to ensure everything was accounted for. It certainly wasn't the most important work being done at the museum at the moment, but she felt as if she were doing her part to protect some of the beauty of England's past.

As Elizabeth sorted through the pages of new arrivals, she was a little surprised at how many new acquisitions had come in. And they were all so different! Many were classics from painters she recognized, while others were family heirlooms, donated to the museum after the passing of an estate owner. It was unusual for such a large collection to be donated to only one museum, but not unheard of. And it gave Elizabeth plenty of work to do.

"What do you think, Mike? Where should we start?" she asked her feline friend. In the evenings, Mike liked to roam the halls of the museum, when he wasn't hunting mice in the courtyard, and they had fast become allies. The handsome cat danced a circle around Elizabeth's ankles, then walked over to a painting that was still covered in canvas and propped against the wall. All the other new arrivals had arrived wrapped in brown paper. Then they had been unwrapped and set out so she could easily identify them. But for some reason, this one had been neglected by delivery staff.

"And what have you discovered over there, Sir Michael?" Elizabeth asked as she reached down to give the cat some grateful head scratches. She looked down the list on her clipboard and then

counted everything in the room. Then she counted a second time, just to be sure.

"Mike… there are more paintings in this room than there should be. One more, to be exact. Did you sneak something in from outside from your personal collection?"

Mike *meowed* as if to say, "don't look at me," and Elizabeth huffed in frustration. She ran into more than her fair share of problems in cataloguing: missing lot numbers, lost paintings, and she even caught an attempted forgery once. But never in her years at the museum had she been delivered *too many* paintings. With her brow furrowed in curiosity, Elizabeth set her clipboard down on a table and approached the wrapped painting.

The canvas covering it was old, weathered and stained, as if it had been traveling with the painting for some time. Elizabeth didn't know why she was hesitating, but her hand was shaking as she reached out to pull the covering away. With a magician's flourish but the nerves of a first time theatre actress, Elizabeth finally tossed the canvas away. When she saw what was underneath, she lost her breath for a moment.

It was a portrait of a man, a beautiful man unlike anyone she had ever seen before. He was clearly tall and lithe, with the kind of regal chin and perfectly curved lips Elizabeth rarely saw outside of the carved marble in the museum. But it was his eyes, his warm, brown eyes that seemed to sparkle even in the painting, that made Elizabeth unexpectedly dizzy. In fact, as she looked into the man in the painting's eyes, her legs felt like they were going to collapse underneath her.

The last thing she heard before she fell to the floor was a concerned *meow* from Mike. And then everything around her went dark…

Chapter One

Even before Elizabeth opened her eyes, she could feel the warmth of the sun against her skin. She touched her hand to forehead, worried that she'd developed a sudden fever, but her skin was cool. In fact, it felt as if she was laying in the shade of a tree on a warm summer day. The catalogue room was never warm, no matter what time of year it was, so she was almost afraid to open her eyes.

"Miss? Miss? Are you injured? Can you hear me?"

A man's voice, as sweet as honey, but somehow commanding at the same time, washed over her and woke her from what felt like a dream. When she opened her eyes, at first, she was blinded by bright sunlight streaming through the lush trees above her. But when they finally adjusted, she saw the face of the man who was speaking to her…

And it was the face of the man from the portrait.

In pure panic, Elizabeth sat up quickly and scurried away from him, the soft grass under hands foreign and dewy. He watched her with a strange sense of amusement until her head began to throb with pain and she grasped it to try and make it stop. Suddenly, he was by her side again.

"Shall I call for the doctor? Are you in pain?" he asked. Elizabeth opened one eye and looked at the man a second time. Then she scrunched her eyes closed tight before opening them one more time. Not only was the man from the painting sitting next to her, but she was in a beautiful backyard garden on a warm spring day, and she was wearing a dress she'd never seen before in her life.

"I… well… a doctor?" she stumbled. He was watching her so intently, it was as if his eyes were looking straight into her soul. "Where am I?"

Now he raised his eyebrow suspiciously.

"Are you not a friend of Lord Melville? This is his party. Did you perhaps bump your head when you fell?"

Elizabeth looked around and tried to remember something but her head was spinning. "Fell? I fell?"

"Yes," the man said, inching a little bit away from her like she

was carrying some sort of illness. “I was looking for a bit of quiet and as I came around the corner, I saw you falling to the ground. It was as if you fainted. And you remember nothing?”

No, I remember your face, and it’s even more handsome in person, she thought as she tried to look away from him. No painter in the world could capture the beauty of his eyes.

“I remember feeling dizzy,” Elizabeth answered honestly, “and then everything disappeared. I’m having a little trouble remembering some details, honestly. Have we met before?”

The man still looked suspicious but he shook his head.

“We have not. I do not even remember seeing you arrive. I am Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. And you are?”

Elizabeth reached out to shake his hand and he looked at her as if she had grown a second head on her shoulder, so she nervously pulled her hand back.

“Bennet. Elizabeth Bennet. I work at The British Museum.”

Mr. Darcy laughed but it wasn’t the kind of laugh that made Elizabeth believe she had said anything that was actually funny. When she simply stared at him, his laughter stopped and his brow furrowed.

“You… *work* at The British Museum? I do not understand. What do you do there? Clean?”

She may have been lost and utterly confused and have a splitting headache, but Elizabeth Bennet did *not* take kindly to people underestimating her skills or intelligence.

“I beg your pardon, sir! I’m a highly trained member of the Civil Service in the employ of The British Museum in the cataloguing department. And I would prefer if you didn’t degrade…”

She was going to continue berating the man until she glanced down and saw the way he was dressed. It appeared as if Mr. Darcy was dressed for a Regency themed costume party. Then Elizabeth peeked around him and saw everyone else was dressed much like him, even herself. *What is going on?*

“Mr. Darcy… what year is this?”

The gentleman laughed again but this time it was in surprise.

“The year? It is 1813, miss. And if it was necessary for you to ask me that question, I think it might be best to summon the doctor.”

Since she was confident she was going to pass out again, Elizabeth thought a doctor might be a good idea, after all.

Chapter Two

“Perhaps it was the warmth that caused your fainting spell, miss. Or did you simply have too much punch?” a tall man with a mustache asked Elizabeth in a condescending tone. She frowned at him and his cravat, which was almost bigger than his head. She didn’t tolerate men speaking to her in such a way; she couldn’t because of her job. If the men who worked at the museum didn’t take her seriously, she’d stay in the cataloging room with Mike forever and her dream of being a curator would never come true.

“It was neither, sir,” she answered firmly. “It was the surprise of well… oh, applesauce! No one is going to believe me anyway. What’s the point?”

Everyone at the garden party who had gathered around her to watch the commotion was staring at Elizabeth like she was a monster. She didn’t blame them; she knew the feeling as she stared right back at them. The only thing that didn’t seem foreign and frightening was the way Darcy was looking at her, and it brought her a bit of comfort. She needed it, given the strange situation.

“Perhaps, it would be best if you went home and rested, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said gently.

“Believe me, Mr. Darcy, I’d like that very much, but I don’t have a home to go to right now, it seems,” Elizabeth answered as she looked around the garden and saw the London skyline. Some of it was familiar but for the most part, this wasn’t *her* London. Her flat may not even exist now.

As everyone continued to look on in fascination, Darcy shook his head and stood up swiftly, which had the strange effect of causing the whole crowd to stand up a little straighter and step away. They were reacting to him as if he were an admiral in the King’s Navy.

“Then you may stay at my home here in London until you have recuperated. The doctor will know where to locate you and my housekeeper can tend to your needs while you get well. I will leave soon for my home in the country, so you can use my home to rest until you are feeling better and... remember where you live.”

The doctor leaned over to Mr. Darcy and whispered loudly, so

everyone could hear him as plain as day.

"Darcy, it might be best if she is kept in the hospital. No one here knows this woman, including Lord Melville. She might be an... unfortunate."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. She'd read enough literature from the era to know that "unfortunate" covered all manner of sins. These people probably thought she was crazy. *Who knows?* she thought with a chuckle. *Maybe they're right.*

But Darcy maintained his firm stance and kept his eyes on Elizabeth, almost as if he were looking at her the same way she looked at him in the painting.

"Nonsense. She is simply confused and confusion is not an illness that can be cured in one of your hospitals. Please give Lord Melville my apologies. Miss Bennet, come along. Mrs. Stone will tend to your needs," he said as he gestured for her to stand. Even though she was afraid about what possible madness awaited her outside the walls of the garden, based on the looks she was getting from suspicious strangers, staying where she was wasn't an option either. Instead, she stood up and followed Mr. Darcy out of the front garden gate and to a waiting carriage.

"Sir? Are we returning home or am I taking the young lady to her own home?" the driver asked, confused.

"Miss Bennet will be staying with us until she has recovered from an illness."

Elizabeth knew she was meant to get in the carriage but she couldn't stop looking at her surroundings. She knew exactly where she was in London, but almost everything looked and felt different. The smell in the air was foreign, the buildings were strange to her… even the people bustling up and down the sidewalks did so with a different sort of walk. She felt like *she* was the one in the painting, but this time, all of her education was failing her. Her mind couldn't stretch to accept what was going on.

Elizabeth leaned over and tried to put her head between her knees.

"Oh, Lord. I feel like I'm zozzled," she said as she tried to take some deep breaths.

"You feel you are what?" Darcy asked with an amused smile on his face. "Miss Bennet, from what area of England did you arrive?"

Elizabeth took another deep breath before she answered, but it wasn't helping with the dizziness that had returned.

“Bath, originally. But I’ve been living in London since I was eighteen, in a flat across from the museum.”

Darcy laughed again but this time, it was one of surprise, coupled with a touch of concern.

“Miss Bennet, there is nowhere to live across from The British Museum. Are you telling me you live *alone* somewhere in London?”

Elizabeth looked up into Darcy’s eyes and his worry overwhelmed her. And just like that…

The world went black once more.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth woke without opening her eyes right away, afraid she might find herself in feudal Japan or at the Moulin Rouge in Montmartre this time. Instead, when she lifted one begrudging eyelid, she discovered that she was in an ornate bedroom, dimly lit by candelabras that were set around the room. At first, she didn't see anything. But once her eyes adjusted to the soft lighting, she spotted Mr. Darcy, who was sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. There was a book set in his lap and he was sleeping soundly, as if he'd been in the room for hours. There were no clocks in the room so Elizabeth had no idea what time it was. Not that it mattered… it wasn't as if she needed to, or could, hurry home.

She didn't want to disturb the man who had been so helpful to her, but as soon as she sat up, Mr. Darcy's eyes shot open and he sat up so quickly, the book fell off his lap.

"Miss Bennet? You are awake! Do you need anything? Some tea perhaps?" he asked through a yawn.

Elizabeth really *could* use a cup of tea, but she didn't want to ask the man for anymore favors. He'd already done so much.

"I don't want to bother you any further," she said as she crawled out of the bed. "I'm going to go look for a hotel where I can stay until I'm not completely out of my mind."

"A what?" he asked with one eyebrow raised. Elizabeth searched her memory for the word they used in the 19th century for hotels…

"An inn!" she said when it suddenly came to her. "I will find an inn."

"Forgive me for being forward, Miss Bennet, but do you have any money? When I found you in the garden, you had nothing with you. I think it is best if you stay here for now."

The candlelight was sparkling in his eyes as he spoke to her and for a moment, she thought that she wouldn't be able to leave even if she had wanted to. She was also so tired, despite the fact it was dark outside and she'd obviously been asleep for hours. Whatever was going on wasn't going to be solved by wandering the streets of an unfamiliar version of her London. Maybe Mr. Darcy was right;

maybe she should just stay here.

"If you insist, but *only* for tonight. Tomorrow I need to try and find some answers about how I ended up in 18… I mean, how I ended up in that gentleman's garden."

Darcy stood and walked over to Elizabeth, watching her carefully with every step. "Miss Bennet, your language is most peculiar, if you do not mind me saying so. Are you quite sure you are from England?"

Elizabeth laughed as she looked around the room at the decor and paintings that were considered antiques in her time. Many of them had passed through her cataloguing room during her years at The Museum. To see them brand new and lovely was even more disorienting.

"Oh, I'm sure I'm from England. Maybe just not *this* part of England," she said as she tried to keep her eyes off of Darcy. Whenever she looked at him, it seemed to make her dizzy all over again, and he could clearly sense it. Darcy walked over to her and leaned against the wall next to her bed, his close presence alone making her stomach flip and flop.

"Please do not feel the need to rush away. You can stay here as long as you need. I have also cancelled my day tomorrow so I can assist you in finding your home and family. Mrs. Stone is going to acquire you some clean clothing and something to sleep in, but in the meantime, I think it would be best for you to go back to sleep."

Before she even realized it was happening, Darcy leaned forward and gave her a soft, gentle kiss on the forehead. Elizabeth felt the electricity of it from the top of her head all the way down to her toes. She knew for sure that her cheeks had turned pink because she felt the flush making her slightly lightheaded again.

"I think I *should* lay down. Please, don't feel the need to stay up with me all night. I'm sure you have your own things to do," Elizabeth said as she tried to hide her face in the darkness. Darcy nodded politely and smiled in such a way that Elizabeth tried to sink deeper into the darkness before he saw how red she was becoming.

"I do have some business to attend to and then I will adjourn to my bedchamber. Please, sleep well, Miss Bennet."

"You can call me Elizabeth," she said before he walked out the door.

"We shall see," he whispered back before he disappeared into

the hallway. Once Darcy was gone, Elizabeth flopped back on to the bed and let out a long, giddy sigh. If all of this was some kind of crazy dream…

She was perfectly content to never wake up.

Chapter Four

The next morning, Elizabeth woke up expecting to be in her own bed, in her own tiny flat with the view of the museum and flower boxes outside her windows. She was sure that everything from the previous day had to have been a dream. Instead, she was still in the same bedroom in Mr. Darcy's house. And not only had water been brought in for her to wash, but a brand new dress was set out for her to change into. There was no clock in her room so she had no idea of the time, but if she had to guess from the rise of the sun, it was still early. Since she could not smell breakfast cooking, Elizabeth thought she should wash and dress quickly and inspect the house before anyone else woke. There had to be a clue why she was here… somewhere.

Once she was dressed, Elizabeth crept out of her room and down the hall of Mr. Darcy's home. She seemed to be on the second floor of a three story building, and in each direction she looked, all of the doors were shut. Instead of snooping, she elected to sneak down the stairs and try to see if she recognized anything in his home. Maybe this *was* all some elaborate dream. Maybe she was sick and in the hospital, having some kind of crazy hallucination. Or maybe she'd accidentally inhaled some sort of ancient mummification powder in the archaeology wing and no one had discovered her wandering the halls of the museum in a haze yet.

Regardless of the reason, she wasn't going to be a passive observer in her own hallucination. Elizabeth was going to figure out what magical twist of fate brought her to 1813, even if it took her a million mornings just like this.

"Remember *something*," she admonished herself out loud as she reached the bottom of the stairs. When she got there, she had the option of going right toward the kitchen or left toward another row of rooms. Since there was no way to be sure that Mrs. Stone wasn't in the kitchen sorting out breakfast, Elizabeth decided to explore the hallway. The first room she found was a beautiful music room, filled with a collection of instruments that the museum curator would trip over himself to acquire. She was tempted to pick up the

violin and play a tune, but then she would wake the entire house for sure.

Next, she found a door that led to a beautiful library filled from the floor to the ceiling with books that, in 1813, were definitely first editions. She found a copy of *Zastrozzi* by Shelley that looked like it was fresh off a printing press. Elizabeth was almost afraid to touch it, but then she realized it was a brand new book and did not require her usual delicate touch.

"That belongs to my sister."

Darcy's voice startled her so badly, Elizabeth almost dropped the book. She fumbled it a few times before she finally caught it again.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry," she said as she quickly put the book back.

"Do not apologize. Georgiana would be thrilled that someone else was enjoying it. I do not care for the horror stories, but my sister has a secret affinity for the gothic. She is also quite fond of a writer named Mary Wollstonecraft. Have you read her?"

Elizabeth laughed as she flipped through the copy of *Zastrozzi*.

"I do, but I prefer her daughter's work. *Frankenstein* is my own personal favorite gothic horror. I think I've read it a hundred times."

Darcy walked over and sat in a chair near where Elizabeth was reading.

"*Frankenstein*? Interesting. I have not heard of it. And you say it was written by Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter? I was not aware she wrote as well."

Elizabeth flinched as she realized her mistake. *Frankenstein* wasn't published until 1818. It didn't exist in 1813 and Mary Shelley was just a girl now.

What have I done? Elizabeth thought in a panic. *What have I done and how can I possibly take it back now?*

Darcy examined Elizabeth with curious eyes, something that only made her more nervous. She may not have understood what was going on, but she knew she wasn't ready for it to end. Elizabeth couldn't imagine leaving Darcy behind, as crazy as it made her feel. A day ago, he had been nothing more than a face in a painting. Now, he was right in front of her, flesh and blood, and she wanted nothing more than to stare into his eyes forever. But there was no way it was going to last if she kept making silly mistakes, like forgetting when her favorite book was published.

“Yes, her name is Mary as well. The book has not been published yet but a friend of a friend let me read a manuscript. In a few years, I promise you, everyone will be reading the younger Miss Wollstonecraft’s work, too,” Elizabeth said, keeping her eyes on the random key she was spinning in between her fingers. She found it on the mantle and it gave her something to fiddle with; it was best to keep her brain occupied or she might say something silly again.

Darcy seemed unconcerned. “Is there anything in this library you have not read? You are welcome to borrow anything you like while you are staying here.”

Elizabeth scanned the shelves, and while there were a fair share of science and technical manuals that did not interest her, she saw dozens of first editions of classic literature that would be worth hundreds of dollars, if not more, in her own time. She even found*The Swiss Family Robinson*, her favorite book as a child, and it was as new as if it had come off a bookstore shelf.

“Have you read that? I bought it for Georgiana but have not had a chance to give it to her yet. Is it not a children’s book?” Darcy asked with genuine curiosity.

“It’s a lovely children’s book. She will enjoy it immensely. I know I did.”

I just did it again! What’s wrong with me?

“May I ask you something, Miss Bennet?” Darcy asked as he leaned forward in his chair inquisitively. Elizabeth was afraid of what he might ask but she knew if she stopped him, it would just be more suspicious.

“You may ask.”

“Are you truly from Bath or are you from… elsewhere?”

Elizabeth could not help but laugh. Did 1922 qualify as elsewhere?”

“Both statements are true, Mr. Darcy. I don’t think it’s my memory that’s failing me. I think perhaps, it’s my sanity. I am beginning to wonder if none of this is real. But, if going mad means spending time in this lovely library with an interesting gentleman, then I suppose there are worse ways to suffer madness.”

Before she could say anything else, Darcy stood from his chair and took the book from Elizabeth’s hands, then set it gently on the table next to them. When he reached out and took her hands in his own, she thought she might faint dead away again, but the embarrassment might actually kill her this time.

“Can you feel my hands in yours, Miss Bennet?” he asked in a hushed whisper.

All she could do was nod.

“Can you feel the warmth of my skin?”

She nodded once again.

“Then how can it not be real? I am here with you, right now, holding your hands in mine,” he said as he suddenly kissed each one. “Is this not the only reality there is?”

The closer he got to her, the less she was sure what was real and what was a part of this strange dream. But in her heart, she knew Darcy was right…

This, Darcy, all of it was what she *wanted* to be real and she wasn’t willing to let any of it go.

Not yet.

Chapter Five

It was late afternoon before the doctor came to Darcy's home, and much to Elizabeth's joy, it wasn't the same doctor from the garden party. He had seemed convinced Elizabeth was some destitute woman who was trying to sneak a piece of Darcy's obvious fortune. This doctor at least appeared willing to listen to her, though she hadn't decided yet if she was going to tell either of them the *full* truth about her situation.

As Elizabeth sat silently in the drawing room of Darcy's beautiful home, the two gentlemen walked in, looking equally concerned.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet, this is my personal physician, Doctor Reginald Winston. He will look at your head injury and ensure there will be no lasting damage," Darcy said with a gentle smile that seemed reserved only for her.

Elizabeth could not help but laugh. No lasting damage? She was currently living the most realistic hallucination humanly possible. Not only was she sure she was in some sort of coma, but Elizabeth was starting to think she was never going to wake up. When she glanced over at Darcy, however, she didn't feel like she was in much of a rush to wake up, either.

"Are you in pain of any kind, Miss Bennet? Does your head still ache? Have you any bright spots or strange images clouded your eyesight?" the doctor asked as he examined Elizabeth's eyes. She knew she couldn't be honest with him, because Doctor Winston would have her committed immediately.

"I do have a bit of a headache, Doctor, but it's nothing I can't handle. Sometimes I get so dizzy I feel like I'm half-seas over, but it passes quickly."

Doctor Winston and Darcy were both staring at her again like she was crazy and she realized they didn't know what she was talking about. It was 1813. She needed to stop using the slang of her time.

"What I mean is, I get light-headed, as if I've had too much… port?"

Is that what they drank in Regency England? Yes, I'm sure of it, Elizabeth thought nervously, confident they were going to start to ask her more probing questions. But the doctor only hummed thoughtfully and wrote something in his notebook with a pencil.

"What do you suggest, Doctor Winston?" Darcy asked nervously. The doctor tapped the pencil against his notepad.

"Well, I suppose we could bleed her. Or I could fetch my jar of leeches from the office."

Elizabeth gasped so loudly, she lost her breath for a moment and thought she might fall out of her chair. But then the men started to laugh and the doctor patted her gently on the shoulder.

"Unlike many of my colleagues, Miss Bennet, I do not subscribe to such medieval medical practices. There is little we can do for a bump on the head, unfortunately, but I am going to leave you some laudanum in the event you have trouble sleeping. I will leave instructions on the dosage as well. In the meantime, please do not engage in any activities that could result in a second bump on the head. Then you might be in real danger of permanent injury. And if you need my services, Mr. Darcy knows where to find me."

"Occasionally, that is the truth. Doctor Winston spends a large portion of his time tending to the poorest among us here in London and out in the country. I was lucky to find him today, in fact," Darcy said, shaking his friend's hand.

"Thank you for your help, Doctor Winston," Elizabeth added, anxious to be alone with Darcy once again. As soon as the gentleman was gone, Elizabeth sighed and sunk down into the chair. When Darcy sat down across from her, he crossed his hands and his legs and stared at Elizabeth intently until she finally called out, "What? What's the matter?"

"Half-seas over?" he asked with one eyebrow raised. Elizabeth gulped nervously.

Oh, great. He's not going to let this go. Now my goose is really cooked.

Elizabeth hadn't engaged in a staring contest since she was a kid, but that is exactly what she was doing with Darcy now: he stared at her, waiting for an answer to his question, and she stared at him, anxious not to answer it. She was sure at *least* ten minutes went by before one of them said anything.

And Elizabeth never lost.

"Tell me something, Miss Bennet. While you have an English

accent, your choice of words can be quite odd. I believe you are from England, you may even be from Bath, as you said. But I also believe there is something strange going on and you are keeping secrets."

Well, obviously. I can't very well tell you that I arrived in 1813 like a character from a Jules Verne novel. Heck, you don't even know who Jules Verne is…

Elizabeth didn't know what to say to Darcy, or even what he expected her to say. It occurred to her that she could have lied. But Elizabeth was an awful liar. She had a tendency to giggle outrageously when she tried to tell a fib. Plus, when she looked into the gentleman's eyes, she couldn't seem to tell him anything but the truth.

"Mr. Darcy, you are right. I am keeping secrets, but I'm keeping them because it's better for the both of us. Perhaps a time will come when I can tell you where I'm truly from, but if I tell you the truth now, you'll just call the doctor back and have me sent to a hospital for the insane. Maybe it's better if we just leave my past in the past for now. Can we do that?"

Darcy examined her face very carefully, as if he was searching her for a trace of a lie. He must have decided she was being as honest as she was able to because he leaned forward and gave her a soft, slow kiss on the cheek. He could have picked Elizabeth up right then and carried her to a bed and she would have done nothing to stop her. But just when her defenses were starting to fall, he pulled away and smiled.

"The doctor said another bump to the head could be dangerous. Since it is a beautiful day, let us take a walk in the park across the way. The fresh air might do your head a world of good," Darcy said as he stood and held out a hand to her. "Perhaps we can stop and visit a good friend of mine who has just arrived in London for a short time. I am sure she will find you as charming and fascinating as I do."

Elizabeth groaned inwardly, unsure she was ready to try and fit in with anyone else in 1813, but it would seem odder if she said no. Instead, she nodded enthusiastically, causing another ache behind her eye that caused her to flinch. Darcy smiled and kissed her forehead.

"It will be a very slow walk," he said.

Chapter Six

The park was as close to Darcy's home as he promised and it wasn't long before the pair were strolling through St. James Park, a landmark Elizabeth actually recognized. At first, neither of them spoke, as if their staring game had continued outside of Darcy's home. But Elizabeth was having a difficult time focusing on anything other than the scene around her. Everywhere she looked, there were men, women, and children, dressed in the kind of clothes she had only seen in the museum. Except everything was so new, and beautiful. Suddenly, she was having a very hard time remembering the park the way it was in her own time.

"You are quiet again, Miss Bennet. Are some of your memories returning?" Darcy asked, startling her from her daydreams. She wasn't sure how to explain what she was feeling but she suspected it was worth the try.

"Quite the opposite, Mr. Darcy. I feel as if the longer I'm here, the harder it is for me to remember anything I did before. I remember the museum, my apartment, my mum and dad. I remember Mike," she said with a smile.

"Mike? Was he your husband or a suitor?" Darcy asked, a trace of concern on his face. Elizabeth laughed, even though she didn't mean to.

"He was the cat who lived at the museum when I worked there. We became fast friends since I did most of my work at night, after the museum closed. He was a sweet little fellow with a bark far worse than his bite. There wasn't a rat in London who didn't know to stay away from Sir Michael. He wasn't always fond of women, the little tosser. But he was my friend."

The whole time she spoke, Darcy watched her with rapt attention, as if he were hearing the reading of a great work of literature. His intense focus was almost unnerving. No one had ever looked that way at Elizabeth before and she was finding it difficult to focus now.

"Continue, Miss Bennet! Tell me more about what you remember," he said like an excited child. But there was no more to

tell.

"I don't remember much more than that, I'm afraid. It's as if my memories before…" she didn't have the proper words to convey *or* explain what followed 'before.' She still didn't know where to start, so Elizabeth opted to try a different approach. "My memories are hazy, like a film that has gone out of focus."

Darcy raised his eyebrow. "A film?"

Elizabeth shook her head and kicked at a stray pebble on the walk. "Nothing. I only mean that the longer I stay here, with you, the further away my old life seems to be."

Much to her surprise, since they were outside in public and she knew displays of affection were often frowned upon in the society where she currently resided, Darcy let his hand fall down and drift softly across hers. Their fingers entangled, only for a moment, before he let go and smiled at her.

"If your previous life is so easily forgotten, perhaps you could consider staying here… I have to return to Pemberley soon and you could come with me. You will have your own room and I can hire a lady's maid to tend to your needs until you feel prepared to return to your own home. Or, if you would like to stay longer, you are more than welcome."

There was so much hope in his words and Elizabeth could feel the quickening of her heart, which told her she wanted to accept his offer. She had only known Fitzwilliam Darcy for a few days, and before that, he was just a face in a painting, a stranger. But now, she felt prepared to abandon her entire past for the promise of this strange and confusing future. Until she understood how she arrived in 1813, Elizabeth's mind didn't know how to answer Darcy's question…

And she didn't know if she should listen to her heart.



* * *

After walking through St. James Park for some time, Darcy exited the park and Elizabeth followed him to a small cottage that was hidden among all of the larger, grand townhomes. The cottage was covered by dangling ivy, and surrounded by flowers and herbs. The smell of lavender and rosemary overwhelmed Elizabeth and made her feel a little dizzy, but in a way that she didn't quite mind.

"Where are we?" she asked as they followed the cobblestone walkway up to the heavy wooden front door.

"This is the home of Helena Hildebrand. She has been a family friend for some time and considers herself a bit of a mystic. I thought it might be beneficial for you to speak to her. I find that people are often quite comfortable speaking to Helena, especially about things they otherwise are not."

Elizabeth hesitated as Darcy knocked on the door. She was barely able to say the words out loud… how could she explain what had happened to another stranger?

The door opened suddenly and the woman standing behind it looked nothing like Elizabeth expected. She was short and plump, with a mass of wild, curly red hair. She wasn't dressed like the other ladies in London either; she looked as if she was wearing only the tulle from a dress, a corset, and a sweater she had made herself.

"Fitzwilliam, my darling! I have not seen you in many a moon. What brings you to…" Helena stopped in the middle of her sentence and stared intently at Elizabeth, her eyes wide and curious. "You are from out of town, are you not?"

Elizabeth felt her blood run cold. Did this woman see right through her?

"You could certainly say that."

Helena reached out and shoved Darcy away, then took Elizabeth's hand. "Come with me, precious. We will set you right."

She dragged Elizabeth into her warm, cozy cottage and shut the door quickly behind them. There were flowers hanging from the ceiling to dry, jars and pots everywhere, and a stew simmering over the fire. It was unusual, but in a strange way, Elizabeth felt at home at home. Helena gestured for her to sit on a chair near a table as she gathered together some herbs and a jug of wine. She poured two glasses of the wine and then crushed up a handful of herbs and dropped them into the glasses.

"So, Elizabeth… tell me. Are women allowed to have more fun in 1922?"

Elizabeth choked on nothing in particular and covered her eyes in horror. “How?” she whispered. “How did you know?”

“Never mind that, Lizzy. The question, as far as I can tell, is do you wish to return from your little vacation? Or do you wish to stay here?”

Elizabeth was lost in her emotions for a moment, unsure of what she should do. She did not know what she wanted, or where she wanted to be, but as she glanced out the window at Darcy, rocking back and forth on his feet on the cobblestone walk…

She could not imagine leaving him.

“Drink up, Elizabeth,” Helena said as if she were reading Elizabeth’s thoughts. “All the way to the bottom of the glass. And then your fate will be sealed.”

She held the glass to her lips, the scent of rich plum wine, rosemary, and peppermint washing over her, and before she knew what she was doing…

She drank every last drop of the rich liquid.

“Welcome home, Elizabeth,” Helena whispered as she reached out and touched Elizabeth’s hand.

What have I done… she wondered as her mind grew foggy. *What have I done.*

Chapter Seven

After Elizabeth's visit with Helena, she and Darcy sat for hours on a bench near her house, talking and laughing, and before they knew it, the sun was beginning to set. The sky behind the trees was beautiful, and for a moment, Elizabeth felt like she was looking at one of the paintings at the museum. Every shade of pink and orange and purple seemed as if it had been brushed across the horizon. She couldn't remember ever seeing anything so lovely in her life.

Then Elizabeth felt Darcy's hand brush against her own. When she turned to look at him, his eyes reflected all the colors in the sunset, and it made her shiver.

"Do you believe in love at first sight, Elizabeth Bennet?"

Elizabeth's head was still spinning from Helena's wine, so she barely heard him at first.

"Hmm? Oh, well, I suppose I have never thought about it. Why?"

Darcy kissed her suddenly, a kiss filled with passion and emotion beyond anything she'd ever known.

"Because," he said as he slowly pulled away, "I think I might love you, sweet girl."

All at once, Elizabeth felt as if she was overcome by a mist made of pure love. She could see every color at once and for the first time since she had arrived in 1813, she felt entirely present. It wasn't a dream anymore; she was truly a part of the world around her.

"Elizabeth? Are you unwell?" Darcy asked with concern in his voice. Instead of answering, she threw her arms around him and held him close.

"I don't know if it was science or magic that brought me here, but I never want to be anywhere else. I love you, too," she whispered into his ear.

Darcy pulled away with shock on his face.

"But what about Mike?"

Elizabeth laughed.

"I think Mike will be just fine."

Epilogue

It was an hour before opening at The British Museum when the curator wandered into the storage room to see if Elizabeth had finished her work from the night before. Instead, he found shipment papers scattered everywhere, and almost none of the new paintings had been organized.

"What in the devil?" he asked as he tried to collect the papers in some sort of order. As he gathered the last of them, Mike the museum cat appeared in the doorway and let out a long, mournful *meow*. The curator looked at the feline curiously.

"Do you know what happened in here last night, Mike? Where did Elizabeth disappear to?" he asked, knowing full well the cat would offer no answers but talking out loud helped his process. As he looked around for some sort of explanation for the mess, Mike began to dance around the man's legs, as if he were trying to push him toward the back wall.

The curator followed the cat's awkward directions and found himself standing in front of a painting that he didn't remember including in the newest acquisition lot. At first, he didn't think much of it. But then he noticed that the impeccably dressed Regency-era man was standing next to a lovely young woman. A woman who looked oddly familiar. A woman who looked to be the spitting image of…

Elizabeth Bennet.

The curator knelt down in front of the painting and adjusted his eyeglasses to get a better look.

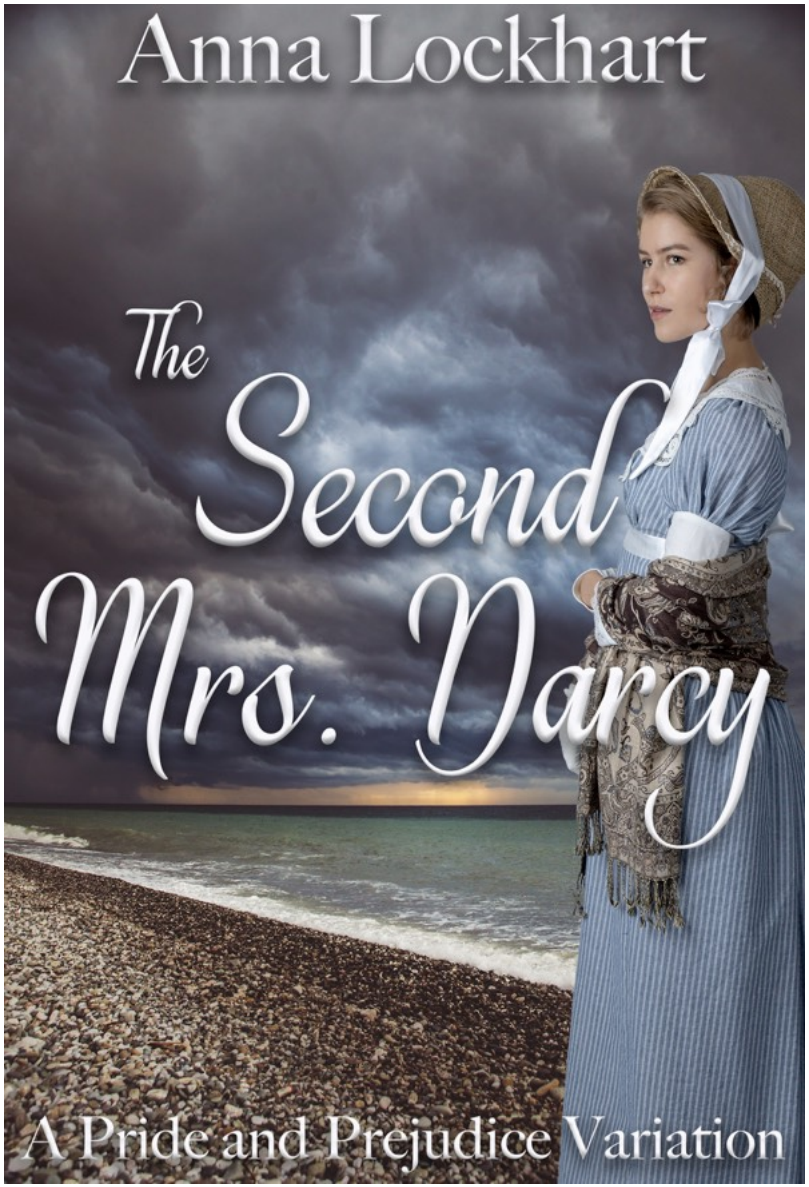
"Curious, Mike. Very curious indeed…"

As the curator continued to stare at the woman in the painting, Mike rubbed his little head against the edge of it, his purrs turning again into sad *meows*, as if he were calling to a lost friend. But the woman in the painting?

She looked more than happy; she looked positively glowing with love, a love that would be forever preserved in a painting that would go on to hang in The British Museum for more than a hundred years…

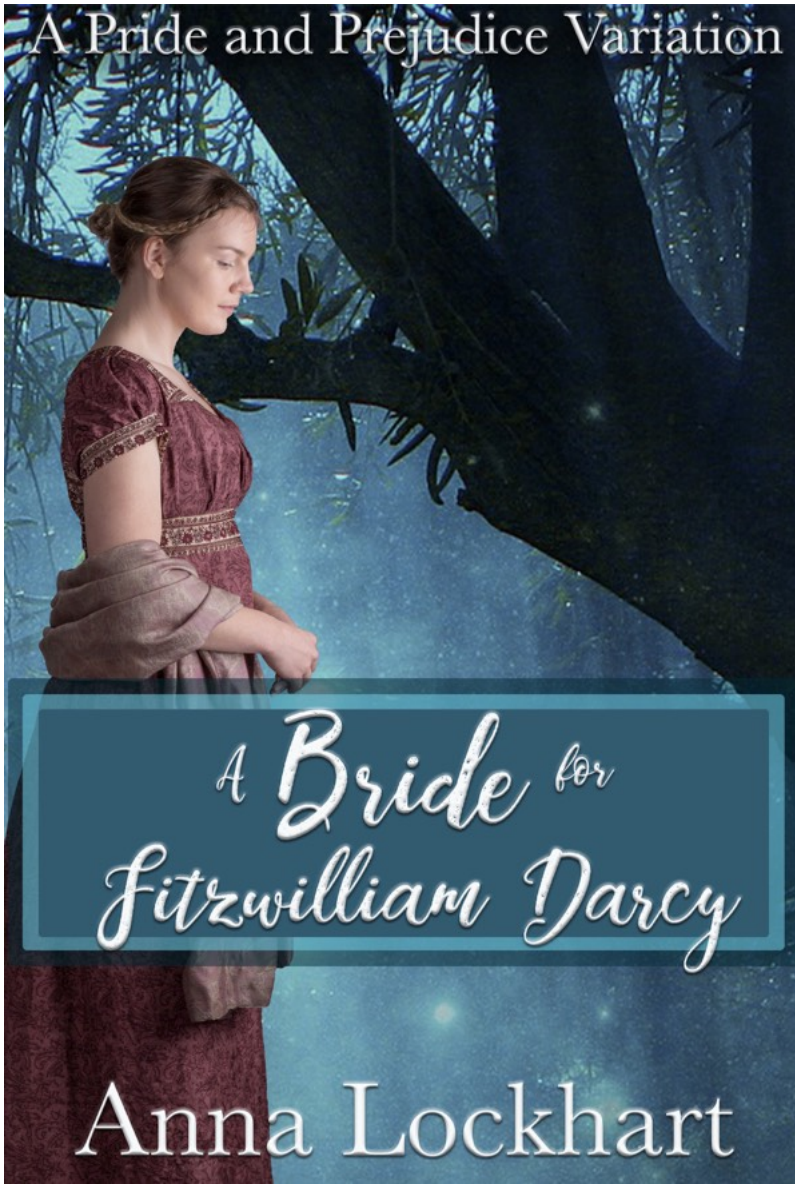
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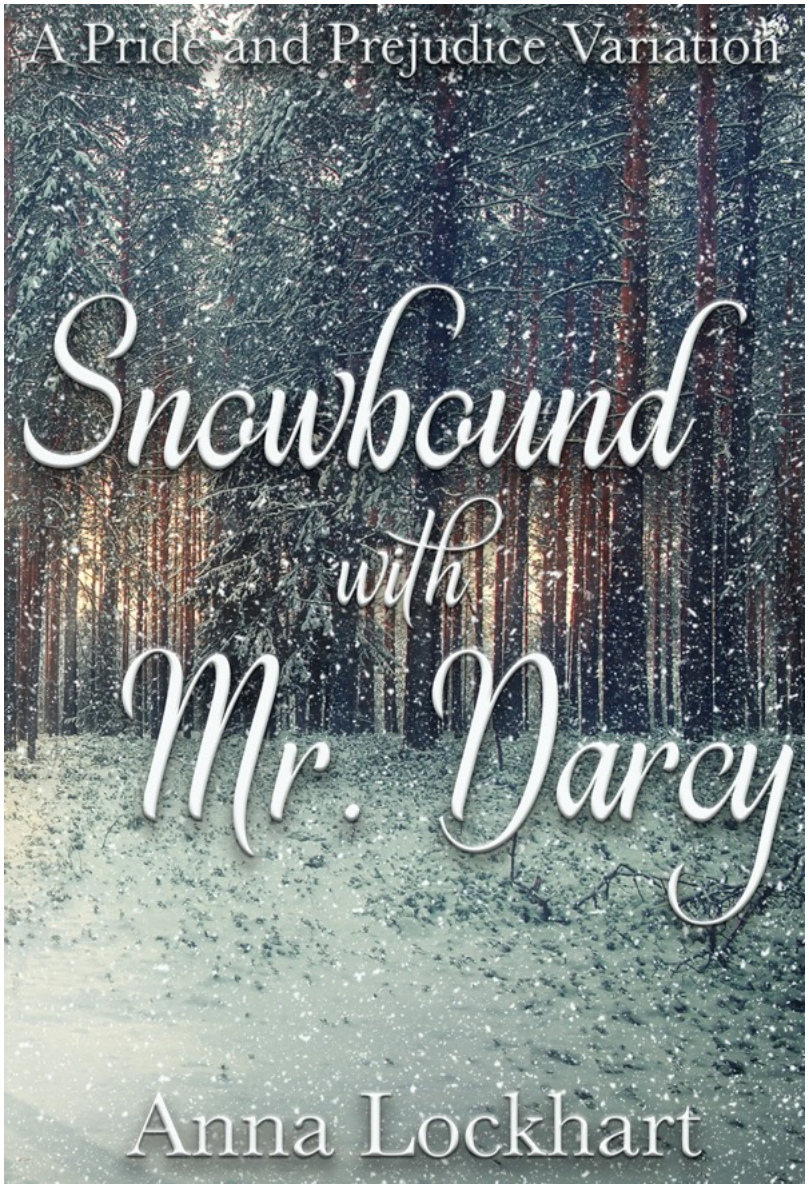
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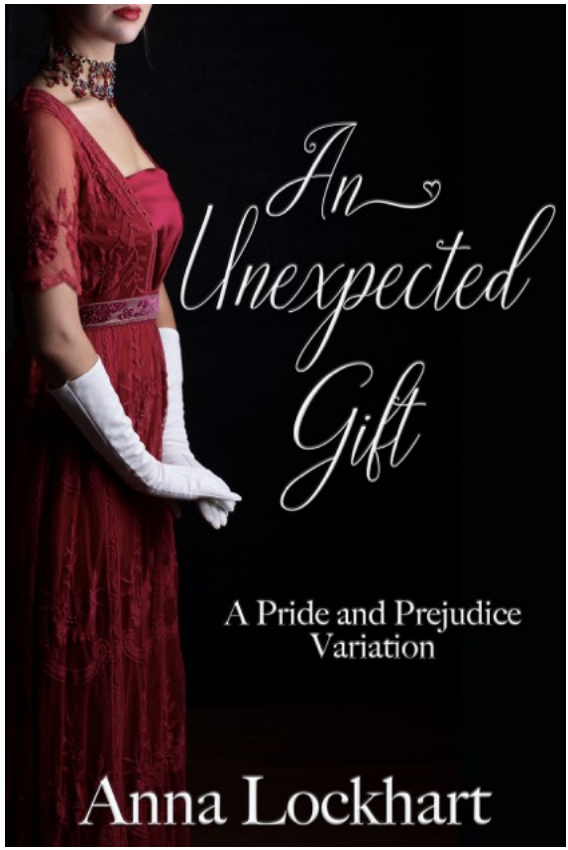
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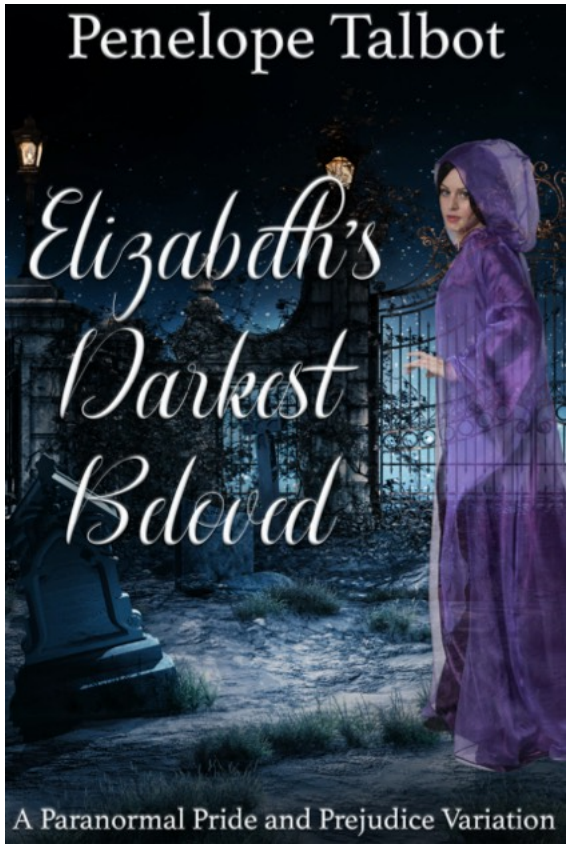


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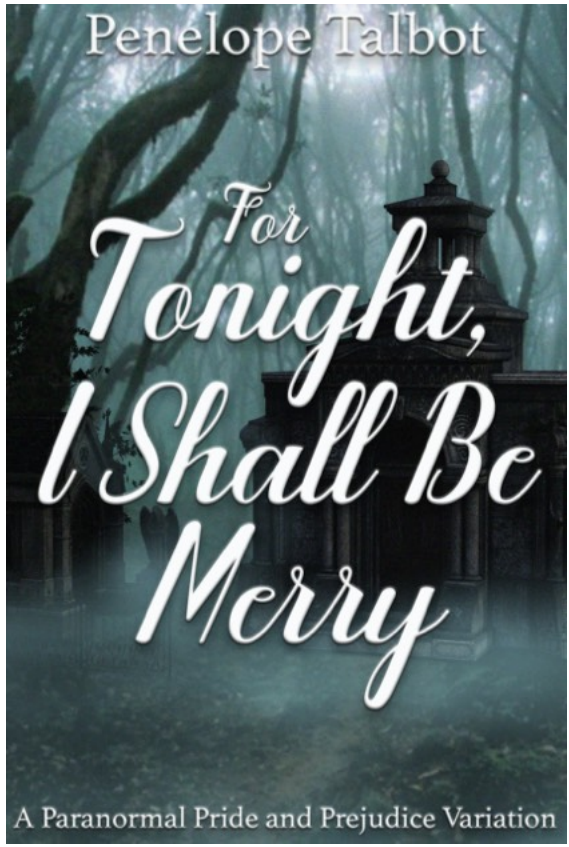
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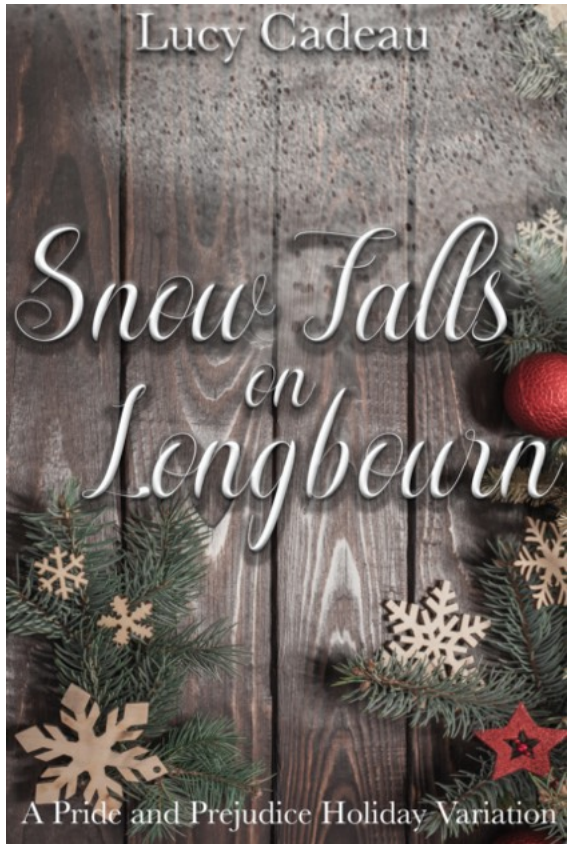
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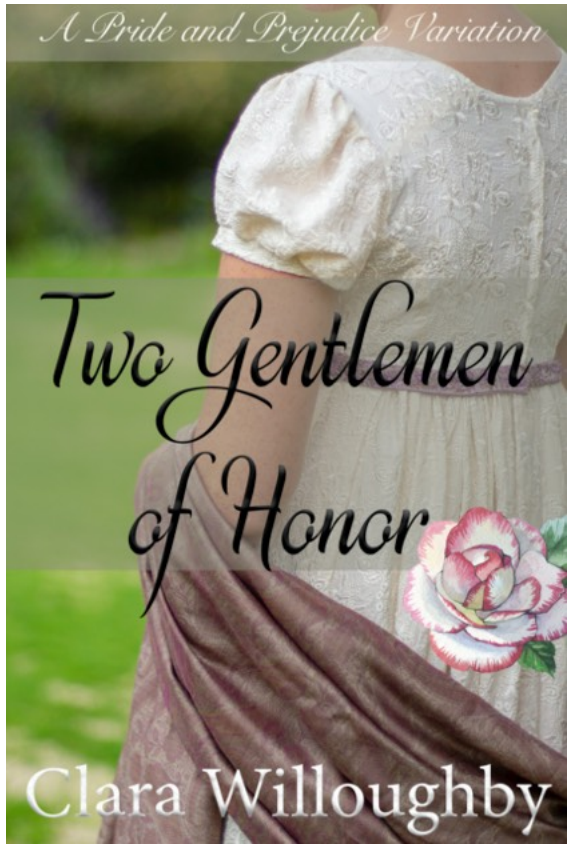
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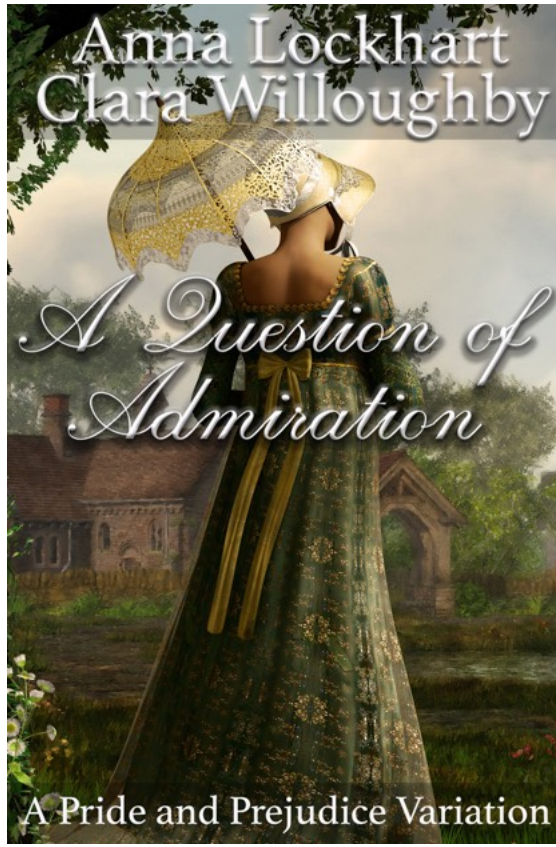
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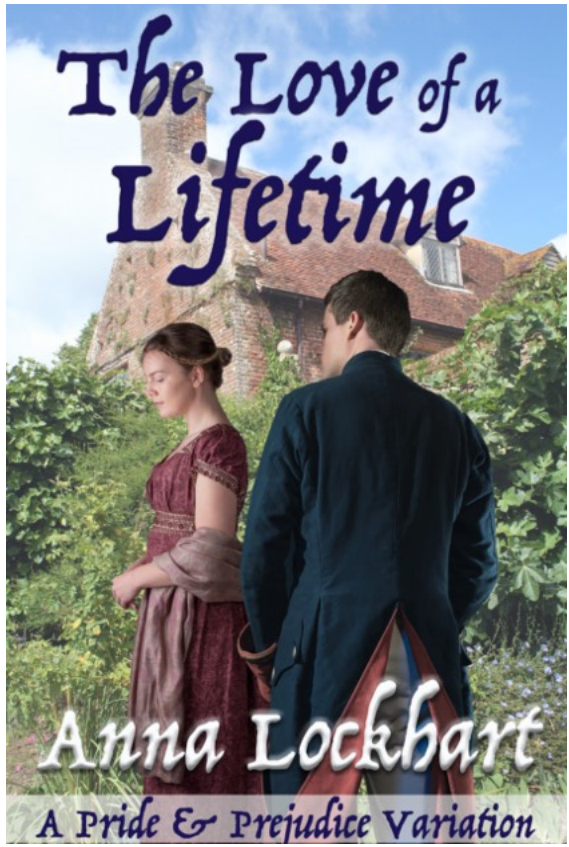
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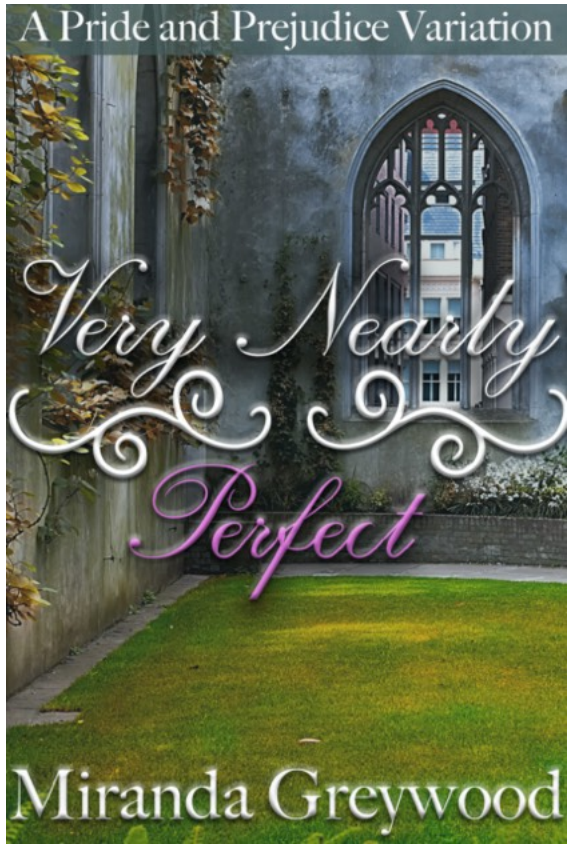
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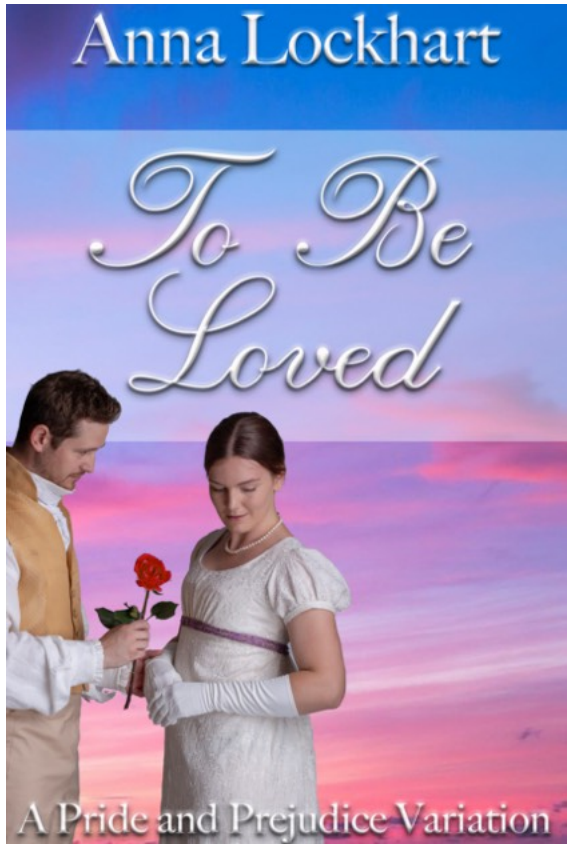
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